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SUBJECT: EU FOREIGN MINISTERS DISCUSS HAMAS, BELARUS, OTHER ISSUES

REF: (A) BRUSSELS 928 (B) BRUSSELS 886

Classified By: Political Officer Vincent Carver for reason 1.5 (b/d).

SUMMARY

1. (U) EU foreign ministers, meeting in Brussels March 20, agreed with the preliminary conclusions of the OSCE/ODIHR that the Belarusian elections were "severely flawed." FMs reportedly discussed Hamas' proposed list of cabinet members but did not issue a substantive statement on Hamas. Rather, FMs will continue to discuss the issue on the margins of the European Summit March 23-24. EU High Rep Solana briefed on his "positive" discussions March 19 in Kinshasha on EU support for electoral security in the DROC. FMs also provided the Commission a mandate to negotiate a trade and cooperation agreement with Iraq once a national government is formed there and supported the constitutional agreement in Bosnia-Herzegovina. GAERC conclusions e-mailed to EUR/ERA. END SUMMARY

BELARUS: DISCUSSIONS BEGIN ON NEXT STEPS

2. (C) According to a Council Secretariat official, the Poles and Baltic states pushed for a strong statement on Belarus. Belgium, Germany and others, however, preferred to wait for OSCE conclusions before issuing such a statement. As the GAERC was concluding, the initial OSCE/ODIHR findings reached Brussels. FMs noted that they "agreed with the ODIHR's assessment that the presidential elections in Belarus were severely flawed due to arbitrary use of state power, obviously designed to protect the incumbent president, that went far beyond acceptable practice, and other shortcomings." While noting their desire to maintain links with the Belarusian people, FMs noted that they regretted "the policy of self-isolation of the Belarus authorities," and said they would begin discussion "on taking restrictive measures against those responsible" for the harassment and other violence against candidates and campaign workers. The Austrian Presidency has circulated a draft text, for review by member states, that will likely be issued March 22.

HAMAS: NO CONCRETE CONCLUSIONS

3. (C) The GAERC's written conclusions on the Middle East were dominated by support for Lebanon's sovereignty and FMs' discussion over lunch with Lebanese PM Siniora. The only reference -- an indirect one -- to Hamas was:

"Over lunch, ministers discussed the situation in the Middle East. The Presidency informed ministers about recent meetings with Egyptian President Mubarak and Palestinian President Abbas in Vienna. High Rep Solana briefed ministers on his assessment of the situation taking into account the meeting of Quartet envoys in Brussels March 16. The President (Austria) noted that ministers would return to the issue of the Middle East at their next meeting (March 23-24) on the margins of the European Council."

Austrian FM Plassnik, in a press conference following the GAERC, noted that the EU message is clear and consistent and remains unchanged. She underscored that the EU will continue to work within the Quartet framework and that Hamas is at the crossroads of deciding whether to be a constructive force. That said, the lack of a clearer written conclusion on Hamas and the slate of ministerial candidates submitted by Haniya to Abbas is striking, as are reports that Foreign Secretary Straw was criticized during the GAERC for the UK's decision to withdraw its observers from Jericho without having coordinated that action with EU colleagues.

DROC: SOLANA BRIEFS ON POSITIVE TALKS

4. (U) Solana, in the post-GAERC press conference, characterized his March 19 talks in Kinshasha on possible EU electoral security assistance to the DROC as positive. Solana noted that President Kabila had "fully agreed" with the proposed EU deployment. FM Plassnik noted that FMs had expressed general agreement to support the mission.

IRAQ: EU READY TO NEGOTIATE TRADE AND COOPERATION AGREEMENT

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15. (U) In an important step in the EU's roadmap for deeper engagement with Iraq, and despite continued sectarian violence there, the GAERC authorized the Commission to negotiate a trade and cooperation agreement with Iraq. External Relations Commissioner Ferrero-Waldner stressed that the EU hopes Iraq will form a government of national unity soon, adding that the Commission need such an interlocutor to begin appropriate negotiations.

WESTERN BALKANS: REITERATE GYMNICH  
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16. (U) The GAERC reiterated much of its informal press statement from the March 10-11 informal Gymnich ministerial (Ref B) in Salzburg, notably underscoring its commitment to the Thessaloniki Agenda. While welcoming the Commission's Communication, "The Western Balkans on the road to the EU: consolidating stability and raising prosperity," and expressing its intention "to take forward its implementation," the GAERC did not decide on any tangible measures, including visa facilitation, for the region.

17. (U) The GAERC conclusions "welcomed the political agreement reached March 18 on constitutional reform" in BiH and characterized the agreement as "a significant step forward." FMs expressed "strong support for the Serbian people in their quest to come to terms with the legacy of the Milosevic regime. This will help them in moving forward towards the family of European nations, where they belong." That said, the GAERC also noted that "full cooperation with the ICTY must be achieved to ensure that the SAA negotiations are not disrupted, and reiterated the "urgent need" for SaM to "take decisive action to ensure that all remaining fugitive ICTY indictees, notably Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic, are brought to justice."

OTHER ISSUES  
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18. (U) The GAERC also reviewed preparations for the March 23-24 European Council (summit), received a briefing from Trade Commissioner Mandelson on the Doha Round and the London March 12-13 ministerial, reiterated its deep concern at Iran's continued failure to cooperate fully with the IAEA; noted its continued strong interest in Darfur and welcomed the AU's decisions to extend the AMIS mandate and to set up a transition from AMIS to a UN operation.  
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